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ABSTRACT

Based on case studies of 15 all-news radio stations, this report isolates major factors contributing to the all-news format's frequent failure and assesses its potential for success. The history of the News and Information Service (NIS), which the NBC radio network operated between 1975 and 1977, serves as a backdrop for the information presented in the report. Sections of the report discuss the following topics: (1) the 15 stations and 33 officials in the original case studies, (2) reasons the stations converted to the all-news format, (3) the effect on local staff, (4) the business community's response, (5) promoting the all-news format, (6) local programing and staff credentials, (7) stations' appraisals of NIS, (8) factors involved in stations' decisions to drop the all-news format, (9) all-news stations on their own after the demise of NIS, (10) the commitment to local coverage within an all-news format, (11) journalism and show business, and (12) the future of all-news radio stations. The report concludes with a critique and confirmation of the viability of all-news formats. (RL)

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EUGENE F. SHAW
and DANIEL RIFFE

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EUGENE F. SHAW
and DANIEL RIFFE

NIS and Radio's All-News Predicament

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When NBC's News and Information Service (NIS) began operations, just after six a.m. on June 18, 1975, the 33 radio stations subscribing to the service represented the most ambitious experiment to date with all-news programming, generally considered "radio's most exhaustive and expensive program format."[1] In less than two years the service was discontinued, but in that interval approximately 60 stations, relying on NIS, had introduced their respective communities to the all-news-radio concept.

NBC announced on November 8, 1976, that May 29, 1977, would be the final day for NIS, which was then offering its subscribers up to 47 minutes of programming each hour of the broadcast day. That left 62 stations with a major dilemma: either to continue with this format (and face the attendant risks and consequent costs involved in obtaining sufficient copy without the aid of a major national service operating all day, every day) or to adopt a different format (and weigh the many imponderables entailed in deciding among already-tried and often-failed alternatives.)

This report documents the predicament of these stations not only during that crisis but also before their commitment to the all-news format, detailing how the stations characteristically fared before, during and after their experience with NIS. Using a purposive sample of 15 of them, this research attempts to isolate major factors contributing to the format's frequent failure and to assess its potential for ultimate success.

All-News Radio Before NIS

Neither the all-news format nor the concept of an all-news network were new to radio when the NIS venture began. The format, in fact, had been in use since early 1960, and the first network of all-news stations developed in the late 1960s.

Terming itself a "total news" station, KFAX San Francisco inaugurated the all-news format on May 16, 1960, in an attempt to improve its ratings with an appealing innovation. All-Talk formats

had already been used in Portland, Ore., and Atlanta; but KFAX personnel maintained that theirs was the first station to be devoted "exclusively to news and news commentary."[2] Other all-news stations later challenged this claim, deriding sunrise-to-sunset programming which one writer called ". . . women's world, the lighter side, travel, news of religion, books, cooking, homes, show business, the lively arts . . ."[3] In any case, KFAX's total-news operation failed in less than a year, and under new ownership the station adopted a religious format.[4]

Few in radio would deny that XTRA, broadcasting from Tijuana, Mexico, was, if not the first to use the all-news promotional theme, certainly the most important of the early all-news stations.[5] XTRA began its continuous news programming in May, 1961. Gordon McLendon, its owner, claimed "the entire Pacific Coast"[6] as the station's market but broadcast from Baja California to avoid FCC licensing problems.[7] The first 24-hours-a-day all-news station, McLendon's XTRA was "strictly rip-and-read—no rewriting, no checking, no individual enterprise."[8] XTRA referred to itself as "an electronic newspaper" and relied almost entirely on Associated Press and United Press International copy.

XTRA was still the only all-news station when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, and its staff believes it was the public's intense appetite for details of that event that made XTRA a profitable station.[9] XTRA stayed all-news until 1968, by which time two Los Angeles stations had also adopted the format; the Baja operation lost its competitive edge to stations with local access to major news sources.

McLendon went on to Chicago, where in September, 1964, he established the first licensed full-time all-news station in the United States, WNUS. That station's rip-and-read technique was highly criticized, and after three years of poor ratings it dropped the all-news format.[10]

Other all-news stations used more professionally respectable news-gathering and reporting methods. Although as early as 1961 WAVA Washington had experimented with large time-blocks of news during evening "drive time,"[11] that AM station did not go all-news, sunrise to sunset, until December, 1964.[12] And in 1965 two Westinghouse stations, WINS New York and KYW Philadelphia, did the same. All three developed extensive local news staffs and lo-

cally edited the copy of newswires and radio news services. WINS is said to have employed a staff of nearly 40 reporters.[13]

When Westinghouse's Los Angeles station, KFWB, also adopted the all-news format in 1968, a three-station all-news network came into existence, and Group W's commitment to news was established. Westinghouse offered KFWB special seminars on all-news operations at the management, sales and reporting levels. The station's editorial staff regarded the format as an opportunity to provide radio audiences with newspaper-quality coverage of events. Gordon Davis, the station's vice-president, is quoted as saying: "We'll be presenting news, not history. We can be compared to an evolving daily newspaper getting out new editions every half hour or 45 minutes. When a major story breaks we'll be able to have as many as 35 people covering it."[14]

KFWB's entry into the Los Angeles market signalled the beginning of competition for the all-news audience in large markets. Los Angeles was already served by XTRA and by KABC-FM, an all-news station since late 1967.[15] Although McLendon once noted that broadcast competition was helpful to all-news radio in that competing stations' news whetted appetites for more,[16] local all-news competition was not always welcome. In 1969, WAVA Washington sued to prevent WTOP from becoming the second all-news station in the Washington market, charging that WTOP's owner, the Washington Post Co., was trying to establish a news monopoly in the District.[17]

By 1975 there were 19 all-news stations in the United States in 14 markets, and in each of the nine largest markets, an all-news station was one of the top five in local ratings. CBS was also developing a string of all-news stations: WCBS New York, KNX Los Angeles, WBBM Chicago, WEEI Boston and KCBS San Francisco. That year 12 others identified themselves as all news: KDEN and KGMC Denver, KEYH Houston, KHVH Honolulu, KRMC Oklahoma City, KSDO San Diego, KSPD Boise, KTAR and KPHX Phoenix, WAVA (AM and FM) and WTOP Washington.[18]

What accounts for the steady increase in all-news stations? How does one explain the 1974 April-May ratings for New York which showed WCBS averaging 57 listening minutes per day for each adult listener, compared with the top-rated music station which averaged 51 minutes?[19] Harold Mendelsohn, professor of communi-

cation at the University of Denver, viewed the popularity of all-news this way:

> It's part of a general social-psychological phenomenon. Americans are now very anxious about knowing what happens the instant it happens. Deep in the recesses of their consciousness is the damn thermonuclear thing and the related fear that we must all be ready at an instant's notice for some tragic catastrophe. People constantly feel in imminent danger. Subconsciously, they're terrified that if they don't keep up, they'll be caught short.[20]

Harper Carraine, a CBS executive, agreed: "People listen to it out of fear. They want to be assured the world isn't going to hell."[21] Ben Bagdikian, journalist and media critic, added: "After 15 years of violent news in the country—protests, riots, assassinations, spreading wars—there seems to be not only a need to listen for news of trouble but also to listen for assurance that nothing desperate has happened."[22] Of the role of the all-news anchormen, he suggested that:

> The consumer of news over the air must be bound to the station not alone by the nature of news, or even by the assurance that there will be the rapid transmission of information, but by a "personality," a being who reads the news and makes pleasant remarks, someone not only liked, but well-liked.[23]

Some radio people adopted a more mechanistic view. KCBS Manager Peter McCoy described the all-news operation as "feeding a huge machine that's never satisfied."[24] Gordon Davis, vice-president of KFWB, said, "If you want water, you turn on a faucet. If you want news, you turn on KFWB."[25] The slogan of his station was "You give us 22 minutes; we'll give you the world,"[26] and reflected the insiders' view of the time: the all-news listener will turn to the all-news spot on the radio dial at specific times to hear a news report, then turn it off. Dick Reeves, director of special broadcasts at WCBS, said: "I think it is the responsibility of the audience to learn how to use all-news radio."[27] The failure to recognize that the all-news station must help the audience to use it doomed several stations in this study.

A peculiar drawback to all-news was quickly discovered. Frank Goerg of WTOP estimated that running an all-news operation costs 60 percent more than do the traditional radio formats, and 600 times more than the computerized or automated programming used by some of the smaller stations.[28]

By 1975 there were indications of difficulty on the network level as well. In November, 1975, Westinghouse dismissed one-third of

its Washington reporting staff, calling its operation unprofitable while only three of its stations were all news. Five months later, Westinghouse reduced staffs at its six foreign bureaus.[29]

The Rise and Fall of NIS

Before these warning signs materialized, however, NBC had already decided to establish its News and Information Service. Since existing all-news operations required 100 or more staff people to produce, broadcast and sell the product, "it took a big station in a big market to pay the freight." NBC was convinced it could solve "the cost problem on the greatest radio format since Top 40 . . . by creating a syndicated service which, at a minimal cost, would provide to local stations in small and large markets everything but the local news component of the all-news radio format."[30]

NIS officials estimated that 75 subscribers were needed in the top 100 markets to balance the first-year budget, projected at $10 million. They anticipated that normal growth would increase the number of affiliates to 150 by the end of 1976 and make the service profitable.[31] To this end, NBC sent mailgrams in early 1975 to each of the 6,900 radio stations then licensed, announcing its plan and outlining the cost to subscribers. NIS would provide around-the-clock news on a cash-and-barter basis. Rates ranged from $750 to $25,000 a month, depending on market size, and stations could yield commercial time to the network, thereby reducing or even eliminating their payment to NBC.[32]

But the initial subscription list of 33 stations never lengthened much beyond the 60 mark.[33] Only two charter subscribers were AM outlets in the nation's ten largest cities. Less desirable FM stations subscribed in four more, and in the other four largest cities NIS was not represented. Jack Thayer, president of NBC Radio Division, suggested the reasons for the slow growth were that the service began in the middle of the week and in the middle of the month, prior sponsor commitments existed at many interested stations and NIS was being selective in its choice of subscribers.[34]

At the peak of its operations, in early 1976, when a staff of 250 was transmitting about 800,000 words a week and offering more than 330 feature items, NIS announced that it would be solvent by 1977. But trade publications dismissed such "professional opti-

mism."[35]

Additional affiliates were slow to subscribe, and only one of NBC's own AM stations—WRC In Washington—was numbered among them.

Los Angeles *Times* writer David Shaw sought an explanation for NIS' difficulties:

> The NBC all-news service was thought to be especially attractive to small and medium-sized cities that neither produce enough local news nor generate enough advertising to support an independent all-news station. But NBC officials had also hoped to sell the service to enough large city stations, at higher rates, to both increase revenue and acquire prestige. But the success of CBS and Westinghouse in most major markets thwarted NBC, and with no AM outlets in these markets, NBC had considerable trouble convincing stations in other markets that their all-news service would be good enough—or last long enough—to warrant the extensive and risky commitment to a new format.[36]

Nevertheless, NIS officials remained publicly optimistic. They continued to offer subscribers special seminars on sales, marketing and operations.[37] And Robert Mounty, a vice-president, persisted in predicting, as late as September, 1976, that 1977 would be the year NIS would turn a profit.[38] Forty-one days later, NIS announced that it would close, leaving to fend for themselves 62 subscribing stations and five others with announced commitments to start all-news operations.[39]

The vicissitudes of NIS have been well publicized and widely analyzed in trade journals.[40] Not so well known is the story of the stations that were associated with—and orphaned by—NIS.[41]

The Fifteen Stations in the Sample

Their story is told from the special viewpoint of 33 radio officials who have a working familiarity with the all-news format at the local-station level. This study's purposive sample comprises 15 stations at which in-person interviews were conducted from late May to late September, 1977. Limited resources of time and money[42] precluded a survey of all the stations. A preliminary interview with the general manager of radio station WBIR in December, 1976, when that all-news station in Knoxville had announced its plans to return to a music format in January, suggested the three criteria used to select the sample:

1) *The station's decision* (to retain or drop the all-news format).

Table 1
The Fifteen All-News Stations in the Study

Station	Market	SMSA[a]	Size[b]	Channel	Signal Strength	Hours Operating	Corporate Ties	Local Affiliation
KJOE-AM	Shreveport	294,703	S	1480	1 K	Day	(Independent)	(none)
KQV-FM	Pittsburgh	2,401,245	L	1410	5 K	Unlimited	Taft Brdcsting Co.	FM
KUFF-AM	Albuquerque	315,774	M	1150	5 K/500 W	Day/Night	(Independent)	(none)
KXXA-FM	Little Rock	323,296	M	95.7	26.4 K	Day	(Independent)	(none)
WBIR-AM	Knoxville	400,337	M	1240	1 K/250 W	Day/Night	Multimedia Inc.	FM, TV
WCAR-AM	Detroit[c]	4,199,931	L	1130	50 K/10 K	Day/Night	(Independent)	FM
WCSH-AM	Portland, Maine	141,625	S	970	5 K	Unlimited	Maine Brdcsting Co.	TV
WEAN-AM	Providence	910,781	M	790	5 K	Unlimited	(Independent)	FM, newspaper
WIBY-AM	Madison	290,272	S	1240	1 K/250 W	Day/Night	Community Serv. Radio	(none)
WLBZ-AM	Bangor	33,168[d]	S	620	5 K	Unlimited	Maine Brdcsting Co.	TV
WPOP-AM	Hartford	663,891	M	1410	5 K	Unlimited	Merv Griffin Group Radio	(none)
WRBC-AM	Jackson, Miss.	258,906	S	1300	5 K/250 W	Day/Night	(Independent)	(none)
WRIT-AM	Milwaukee	1,403,688	L	1340	1 K/250 W	Day/Night	Great Trails Brdcsting Co.	FM
WSOC-AM	Charlotte	409,370	M	930	5 K/1 K	Day/Night	Cox Brdcsting Corp.	FM, TV
WWTC-AM	Minneapolis	1,813,647	L	1280	5 K	Unlimited	Buckley Brdcsting Co.	(none)

[a] Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area.

[b] As determined by the SMSA figures and categorized as follows: L = population of more than a million; M = 300,000 to one million; S = less than 300,000

[c] New owners, Golden West Broadcasting Co., changed the call letters to WCXI-AM when it returned to a music format in 1977.

[d] City population only.

The sample included nine still-operating all-news stations (May, 1977) and six which discontinued the format.

2) *Size of market*[43] in the following categories: large—more than a million (4 stations); medium—300,000 to a million (6); small—less than 300,000 (5).[44] All regions except the Far West are represented.

3) *Type of ownership*. Six stations in the sample are locally owned and independently operated or owned by corporations with broadcast properties outside the local market, although two of them have "sister" FM stations in the city (and one of these is also affiliated with the city's leading newspaper).

As Table 1 shows, a fairly wide spectrum of station types emerged, including one FM station, when further categorized by such operating characteristics as signal strength and dial location. The first criterion was intended to provide some pertinent contrasts between broadcasting conditions conducive to a successful all-news operation, or contributing to its failure. But for the six stations the all-news format was predicated on the availability of NIS; its demise automatically dictated local abandonment of that format. Several of the stations which did retain the format after May, 1977, when the study began, were professionally struggling and financially floundering. At least six of these nine were actually on the verge of changing format or curtailing their all-news programming at the time of the interviews. By January 1, four of them had joined the other six in changing to another format.

Rather than provide 15 case studies, this report presents a summary account of the stations' experience with the all-news format during and, where applicable, after their association with NIS and a critical assessment of that format as expressed by officials of those stations and as suggested by an analysis of a follow-up survey done in 1979. The interviewed managers, news directors, advertising directors and other personnel at the 15 stations are quoted anonymously at their request..[45]

The Decision to Become All-News

One characteristic proved decisive in the decision to subscribe to NIS and convert to the all-news format: its officials had decided they had no viable alternative. These stations in their respective

markets were below or, at best, at the median in listener ratings and in danger. They all viewed the appearance of NIS as an opportunity to improve their competitive positions by introducing a unique format to their areas. Some examples:

> There was no future in what we were doing [adult contemporary]. We had to have lavish contests just to maintain our seventh position in the market. That was not enough to get the dollars we wanted.
>
> It had been straight downhill for more than seven years. The owners took little interest in the operations, though they've been successful in other businesses. They actually thought all-news would be less expensive than what we were doing [contemporary].
>
> We went all news to stand out in the crowd. We had to be totally different, uniquely saleable if we were to continue operations.
>
> Even a religious format did better than we in the surveys. So we realized we had to take drastic steps.
>
> In the late 60s we began a downward slope. . . . Eventually we became a women's "glib" station. We dumped that six months before the FCC review of our pubic hairs. We went back to contemporary, but our image was hurt, almost ruined. We lost our audience. We went from an overall 6 percent to 2 percent in ratings. Our teen audience dropped in a decade from 11 percent to nothing.

Others would admit only that "We turned to the news format for its quality audience" or "to improve our demographics in listenership" or that they wanted "to acquire a good image; we thought all-news would open doors to a new list of clients and accounts." "It was the only way, we thought, to extricate ourselves from rock bottom." Or "There was no other uniqueness; the area is overwhelmed with music and we had no place to go." The ascendancy of FM and its future impact on AM stations as music channels were cited by a few managers for their "rush to NIS before others grasped the significance of the FM challenge."

The decision to change from mostly music to all-news—from entertainment to information—was, with few exceptions, not based on a cold appraisal of local realities. One station did retain Frank N. Magid Associates[46] to study the community to determine acceptance among residents and advertising agencies. Another consulted the manager of an all-news station in a larger city for an estimate of the cost of conversion. Two others reported conducting their own research, which, however, appeared to be haphazardly done. In one instance, the decision was made by the parent company in an-

other city without consulting the local station manager.

The Effect on Local Staff

The conversion was a traumatic experience for most local staffs. "Almost overnight," one manager said, "we found ourselves in the news business when before we played rock for kids." Most stations allowed their disk jockeys to stay on, if they wished, as news anchor people, although a few required them to audition; in most such cases the auditions were perfunctory. Each station had at least one or two immediate defections, and a few experienced an almost complete turnover of on-air personnel within a month of the format change. Among unionized staffs, those who opted to leave or were asked to do so received separation pay of up to 12 weeks and waiver of their "no compete" agreements (not to accept a position at another local station).

The previous format's news department, typically two to four persons, became the nucleus of the all-news editorial staff, although most of them chose anchor positions when available—and in most cases had to learn how to "work the board."[47] To this nucleus the stations added from two to eight persons to handle news gathering, editing and dissemination.[48] What governed the size of local staffs during the NIS period was not the size of the market in which the station operated or its signal reach, but the station's dependence on NIS.

No station allowed itself more than six weeks to reorganize; most had less than a month. And while the staff was becoming acquainted with the NIS "clocks,"[49] learning how to fit its own efforts into each 60-minute schedule, studios were being adapted for the new enterprise. Additional equipment had to be installed—phone lines, scanners,[50] playback units, etc. Estimates for remodeling went as high as $50,000, but most reported no heavy investment in new equipment and none for additional space. One did convert a large closet into an editing room; another salvaged a 20-year-old two-way radio. "When we first started, we had only two typewriters. Our people actually had to stand in line waiting to use them."

Reporters invariably had tape recorders, but only seven of the stations had either mobile units (none with remote capability) or two-way radio. No station had more than three cars available to its

reporters; most had only one. At two stations, staff members used their own cars; and at two others cabs were used (on the rare occasions when the decision was made to report the event first hand). "Our reporters normally walk to their beats" or use public transportation, one news director said. In one of the largest cities in the sample, the station relied on designated pay phones across the city to maintain hourly contact with its reporters in the field.

News staffs nevertheless worked with new-found enthusiasm. But such high morale was not found among the sales staffs. Many salespeople, those who did not leave in disgust or dismay, saw their commission-based income diminishing. "When we had a music format, they would make the pitch to potential customers, 'Our listeners are the people you have to reach; you don't have to like their kind of music.' " Now they had to contend with an untried format which they themselves did not believe in and local advertising agencies often would not accept. The latter "wanted to be assured they were reaching an audience," said one sales manager, "and we had no evidence that anyone was listening to us." Another said, "We couldn't dispel the idea they had that nobody would listen to us for long."

The Business Community's Response

Most agencies took a wait-and-see attitude. Some even "badmouthed the format," according to one station manager. "Our argument," explained another, "was watered down (by the agencies) before it reached potential clients." Many sales managers, however, understood. "They're obligated not to take chances with other people's money." Agencies occasionally did buy time on these stations but usually only to comply with a client's expressed wish. "The 54 agencies in the city know me; so we got something."

But 60 to 90 percent of these stations' business came directly from business establishments; i.e., the sales staffs had to go out and get it. One or two stations reported no lag in local billings, although all sales managers confessed they and their staffs had to work hard to get new accounts. Several stations lost all of their former clients when the shift to all-news was made. And most, especially those independently owned and without a sister station (TV or FM radio) in the market, found themselves with no national advertising. One station even lost its national representative when it went all-news.

With only a few exceptions, the sales managers took their cue from the NIS sales manual and sought out new clients who had never before used AM radio: savings and loan associations, small specialty shops, banks and commodity brokers, oriental rug dealers, camera stores, automotive dealers, airlines and fast-food services. "All-news format actually opened up a new market for us," a sales manager recalled. "We began going for industrial accounts, like loading equipment costing $40,000 to $50,000, or mini-warehouses (trailers), which need a select audience—company decision-maker types." He explained why: "Such accounts do not need a lot of sales" to pay off. Notably absent were large retail department stores, which generally buy radio time through an agency.

The sales staffs discovered that they not only had to sell time but also had to sell the client on the all-news format, although many remained unconvinced themselves of the advantages of all-news advertising. Sales managers listed them as: 1) Commercial messages form an integral part of the information that an alert audience is attending to ("All-news programming makes your message believable, since it interrupts no music presentation"); 2) In-car recall of all-news advertising equals TV recall, and 80 percent of all-news listenership is in the car; 3) The format provides an audience that can afford the product ("It pinpoints the demographics with the least amount of wasted coverage"); 4) "All-news programming appeals to an upscale, above-average income audience," many of whom are exclusive listeners, who cannot be reached on music stations or even by newspaper or TV advertising. These points echo those expounded in the manuals distributed by NIS.[51]

But for a long time—in many cases not until it was too late—most stations had no local data to substantiate these claims. Indeed, their audience ratings more often than not contradicted the sales pitch. As a result, "My sales people were handicapped and had to be vague in their approach to clients," a station manager conceded. Another said, "It's hard to get your sales staff enthusiastic when the clients aren't."

One news director blamed his station's sales staff. "We had no major advertisers because our sales staff didn't know, and seemingly didn't care to learn, how to present the all-news image to advertisers. We had the same old ads with music in the background that we had before the changeover. Sales didn't know how to package

commercials and they lacked motivation."

One sales manager anticipated the problems by hiring a new sales staff. "We started from scratch and I trained them. We had no trouble recruiting. We looked for personality and enthusiasm, not for experience. We avoided hiring bad habits by favoring young personnel." That station is one of the five, of the 15 stations surveyed, that retained all-news programming into 1979. But even that station relied on national averages and facts and surmises supplied by NIS. The budget did not allow for a local survey.

Promoting the New Format

A tight budget at most stations also precluded heavy promotion among advertising agencies or a wide publicity campaign. Publicity ordinarily was restricted to outdoor advertising (billboards, buses, rental cars); some television and FM spots (usually only on sister stations); promotion pieces for weekend editions of newspapers and advertising in area weeklies (metropolitan dailies were too expensive), most frequently to announce forthcoming sports or cultural coverage. Some settled for the slogan on their cars: "a traveling billboard." Others deliberately eschewed promotion, believing it would detract from the format's authenticity and the station's believability.

As a result, most station managers would now concede, a majority of the people were unaware of the new radio format introduced into their city. The few stations that did go in for heavy promotion directed it largely to advertising agencies, civic leaders, government officials and advertising prospects. One station estimated that it spent $25,000 on such promotion in the first two years, but the cocktail parties, direct mail campaigns, ads in trade publications and luncheon talks to civic groups may have been misdirected. "The general public still didn't know what we were doing," a station manager admitted. The ratings remained low. And, though "the [station's] owners were pleased with the compliments they now heard [about the station] at their country club, their Buick and Cadillac friends still did not buy time on the station."

Two stations in the survey claimed rating gains. In the first year one went from seventh to third place in audience share. (The other claimed gains but did not disclose its share of the market.) The rest

made no gains and most fell even further behind. One dropped as much as four places in the local rank ordering. ("Only one FM channel was below us.")

Local Programming and Staff Credentials

Although such failures are now attributed to lack of initial promotion and publicity, a not inconsiderable factor was the quantity and quality of local news programming. Where a station scored gains large enough to be detected by Arbitron or Pulse,[52] the managers pointed proudly to word-of-mouth publicity supplied by enthusiastic listeners.

Since all stations surveyed had access to the NIS feed, they differed in content only in the amount of time they allocated to NIS programming and in the quality and emphasis of local coverage and locally-produced features. Most stations used the maximum of NIS offerings each hour in non-prime time—47 minutes of programming, some even during drive-time periods. For others, "We used as little NIS in drive time as we could," which usually meant nevertheless no less than 50 percent of the available NIS material during those hours.

One news director estimated that about 25 percent of the station's material was of local origin, most of it obtained by phone, with few "actualities."[53] Many stations relied on non-staff reports of city council or school board meetings. Where available, the state's radio network supplied state news, especially from the state capital. Local newspapers were regularly tapped for items the station had not obtained by its own resources. "We gave credit only when the story was copyrighted."

The harsh reality of understaffed news departments faced most of the stations. Some made do with as few as five full-time newspeople, even after they retained the all-news format when NIS ceased operations. The limited staff was expected to do all the anchoring, "carting,"[54] editing and reporting required to cover local beats and breaking stories. Some station managers, particularly in the smaller towns, boasted the largest news staff among radio stations in the city, which would not be surprising when competing stations put out only 10 minutes of news an hour, much of it ripped and read from a newswire. In contrast, stations with NIS had to fill a mini-

mum of 13 minutes an hour, and, in prime time, 30 minutes or more.

Station managers generally recognized that "The news staff was not large enough to do the job properly," but the failure of the sales staff to generate revenue made understaffing a continuing problem. "For all its newsgathering flexibility and potential marketability, all-news has inherent problems from the beginning, the basis for stations' failing. One main one is generating sufficient advertising revenue to offset operating costs."

The resulting low pay tended to attract only the inexperienced and the very young. The median age of the news staffs, many of them holdovers from previous formats, was 26, with one-fourth of the personnel under 24 years old and another 25 percent older than 34. The age range for all stations was 21 to 60, but the older staff members, typically not college graduates, usually were restricted to anchoring and editing. The younger staffers, assigned more frequently to reporting and editing, had at least some college. Of those with a college degree less than half had majored in journalism, broadcasting or telecommunications.

One news director "had to become an English teacher" for his staff and in the first few weeks had to rewrite most of the stories himself into broadcast style. "We really didn't have real writers," a station manager conceded, "so our material was pretty vanilla." The difficulty in recruiting qualified news personnel locally was a common complaint from managers and news directors in the smaller cities.

A number of the surveyed stations used interns—"apprentices," as one manager called them—whose part-time work at the station earned them no money but promised them experience and sometimes course credit at a nearby college or university. They were usually assigned carting, editing and phone work, and on rare occasions were even sent to cover a story. One station had as many as five such "hungry kids" helping a shorthanded staff. The Internal Revenue Service began to investigate these "training programs" as to whether the trainee actually contributed necessary work. In one such investigation the IRS found the station could not have fulfilled its work requirements without the intern and ruled that the station had to pay the trainee. That decision ended the intern program at many stations.

In addition to a full-time news staff, the stations employed part-time help, as many as five or more persons, mainly for weekend anchoring and editing, when little local reporting was done. A few stations had plans for mini-documentaries, public affairs features and human-interest stories, but one station manager said, "We never got around to doing any. . . . They were all too busy covering the hard news." Time was one factor, but there was also little money for such journalistic ventures.

There was seldom any editorial comment during the stations' NIS days, at least not on a regular basis. Was it reluctance to alienate advertisers? One manager said, "We couldn't afford to make enemies." But there was also the reluctance of the station managers to assume an unfamiliar role. "Not everyone can do editorials," said one of them. Two others did not want to.

In real news emergencies, on weekends as well as on weekdays, the regular staff worked overtime to assure at least minimum coverage. Even a station's sales force could be pressed into service to help cover elections. But overtime pay for unsalaried help exacerbated the financial condition of the already burdened stations.

City beats were routinely covered by phone. Only one station surveyed, in a large market, employed a reporter full time for outside work. The stations encouraged phone rips and two promoted call-ins as a weekly contest among their listeners. One station regularly provided city-league bowling scores because they were ignored by other media. There was even an occasional scoop. And on major stories the stations could usually rally their forces for an all-out effort.

Not all these stations hired only inexperienced help. A few, in fact, were competitive in their area at $330 or more a week for an experienced broadcast journalist, but not many veteran journalists applied. Even the news directors, who were under 30 more often than not, lacked credentials to direct a major news enterprise. They had either graduated from college in the last five years, seldom with a journalism degree, or had only a high-school diploma but worked up through sales, disk jockeying or news anchoring. Yet their dedication was evident throughout the interviews, as was their professional approach to their work. One manager even accused the news directors of all-news stations of being unsympathetic to management. "They are news oriented and talent oriented. They feel re-

sponsible to their own staff and to the journalism profession, not to management."

The station managers themselves, with one notable exception, could claim little if any journalism expertise, though two confessed a long-standing ambition to "get into the news game with radio." As holdovers from the stations' music formats, they found themselves in charge of what for them was a strange commitment—"an exotic format," one manager called it. Their background in sales or production did not prepare them to make hard decisions on journalistic policies and standards. The more prudent sought advice of outside consultants even in hiring news staff, when the owners and the budget allowed. The others—the majority of station managers—relied on young or inexperienced news directors or local friends in the profession.

The Stations' Appraisal of NIS

Yet it was the station managers with whom NIS had all its contacts. Several news directors expressed pique that NIS officials never dealt with them directly, and as a result they felt that NIS neither comprehended nor appreciated the journalistic, as contrasted with sales and financial, problems encountered at the stations. Even NIS requests to cover a local story for national airing were addressed to station managers, who viewed such an assignment as an honor. But, especially at the smaller stations, such requests taxed resources, not just in covering the story but filing the report to NIS, which always requested three versions and expected to receive actualities.

Producing these reports and getting them accepted by NIS frequently proved time-consuming for shorthanded staffs. Sometimes there was apparently no record of the request at the NIS office when the station attempted to file the report, and the production manager or news director did not know who at NIS had authorized the assignment. One news director recounted how surprised an NIS editor was when, calling the local station about midnight to make an emergency request, he learned that the news director was the only person on duty at the studio.

Even the station managers criticized NIS officials for not being able to understand the local station's problems, especially those of a

small operation. "NIS oversold its project because of ignorance of the local situation. Their field people tried to help, but their suggestions did not take into account the local peculiarities."

NIS generated an enormous amount of printed material for consumption by the local staffs. Its manuals, like "Guidelines for Advertising and Promoting an NBC News and Information Station," "Marketing Manual," "Start Your NIS Station Right," were, in the opinion of most local officials, geared to large-market stations. "I found NIS manuals interesting. I read each thoroughly, because they read like novels."

There was general acclaim, however, for the sales ideas circulated by NIS. The sales managers found the target group index especially valuable for an effective sales pitch to advertisers; they believed the notion propagated by NIS of the salesman as an advertising consultant rather than a time seller helped boost staff morale. The promotional ideas proposed by NIS, on the other hand, were largely regarded as either unrealistic or too expensive.

NIS was also criticized by some station managers for failure to provide previews of its feature material. "Not everything NIS did appealed to this market," one manager insisted, "but I was allowed no option or opportunity to reject what was not of interest here." Complained another: "Too much was meant for a life-style not found in this town." Yet most officials gave NIS top grades for the quality of the service—"a fantastic job." "NIS had exceptionally fine features." "They did brilliant things in sports."

But there were complaints: "NIS demanded too much of our time." "They controlled our sound, and I was never satisfied with it during drive time." "NIS could not provide the basic information ingredients of radio news: local time, area weather, local traffic conditions and what happened in the backyard while the town was asleep—yet NIS did not allow us enough prime time to do all this adequately ourselves." "If a hot story developed locally, we couldn't always get in because of our commitment to NIS."

The station managers also faulted NIS for not pressuring NBC "O and O" stations into becoming all-news channels.[55] And there was consensus that "it was a serious mistake signing up mostly the smaller markets."[56] "NIS's real failure was in hooking up only with a lot of losers. It should have been more aggressive with stations in the major markets."

All agreed that the timing (during the rating weeks) and the manner of NBC's announcement of the discontinuance of NIS was not only regrettable but seriously damaging to the station's local prestige and economic survival. No station surveyed received advance notice of NBC's plans to terminate NIS. And most were unprepared to respond properly when approached for a statement by other news media, which, in most cases, scooped them on their own story.

Some officials were still bitter at the time of the interview about the decision. "NIS shortchanged us and themselves. Two years was too soon to decide to quit. A while longer and they would have got some powerhouse AMs. I begged them, 'Don't cripple us.' " One station owner was convinced that "The decision to drop NIS was a power play among the top NBC officials, and the anti-radio brass won out."

NBC failed to learn and profit from others in the radio-news business. Like Westinghouse. The network thought it knew it all. They went first class from the outset. They started by running, instead of prudently crawling. And they realized too late it's terribly costly—triple the normal format. Their expenses were astronomical, and they had to charge exorbitantly high rates to affiliates who could afford it.

He also blamed the high cost of labor in the north and restrictive union regulations.

The Decision to Drop the News Format

When NBC decided to take NIS off the air, about one-third of its then 62 subscribers opted for another format, including six in this study. One had anticipated the sign-off and returned to music as early as December, 1976. By January, 1978, four more stations in the study had discontinued all-news programming when "going it alone" proved too expensive.

It was largely an economic matter for the stations. "The decision was not capricious," one manager insisted. "It was just not feasible to maintain the format." "When NIS went, so did the affordability of the format." All more or less agreed that "When the association idea fell through, we heard our death knell."

The "association idea" was an attempt by some of the all-news stations to form a cooperative of sorts to exchange material among member stations and contract with wire services and syndicates for

news and features.[57] But the larger stations discovered it was less expensive to make independent arrangements, and they vetoed the association idea. As a manager of one of the smaller stations explained:

> If we were a member of the association we would have paid $750 a month for syndicated stuff – about a hundred soft features a week, what we estimated we needed to give us sufficient variety. But on our own, 20 to 25 pieces would have cost us that much, a price we probably could have afforded but not for so little material. And the station could not produce – reproduce – NIS quality on its own.

Soft news and features, regarded by many station managers as "the main ingredient of NIS," was the primary content concern of the local stations: what to fill in with between the hard news segments that the networks regularly supplied. They found that the highly regarded NIS features would be prohibitively expensive to replace. And, of course, without NIS, local production costs would also increase and a much larger staff become mandatory.

But most station managers said they would have stayed with the format had audience ratings and advertising revenues showed improvement. Few, however, could project advertising gains to offset higher operating costs, which one manager estimates to be at least 50 percent higher than what NIS cost. Local advertisers, in fact, doubting the station could survive without the NIS affiliation, "lost interest," as one sales manager put it. "They didn't want to advertise on a station that might be dying." December, 1976, billings were for many stations the lowest in their history.

Ironically, most all-news stations experienced a slight rise in audience ratings in their 1976 fall book. The format was catching on with local listeners. But before the ratings were published, the stations had already made irreversible decisions and some had announced a programming change.

The stations that reverted to some music format continue to maintain a strong news image. "Now in drive time we have extended news, more than before going all-news. The real change, however, is how we prepare it. They've [the staff] become real professionals with the copy and carting. And we do a lot of actualities by phone."

The news staffs of these once all-news stations are usually larger than before their NIS experience – a staff of three or four instead of two or three; and all strive for a more comprehensive coverage. "We

even have an eight-minute news spot during half time of our high school sports broadcasts." The manager of a station now using syndicated music observed that "with automation we can concentrate locally on the news." Some stations also reported that they have an easier time selling sponsored news than they did when they were all-news.

Most stations converted to a music format ("MOR"—middle of the road—"oldies but goodies") that the managers thought would hold most of their all-news listeners because it "fits all-news demographics," and would earn new listeners. But most took an even further drop in billings initially. Many new-found accounts for the all-news format shied away from the stations altogether, and former clients were slow to return. One station was reportedly operating with a monthly deficit of $7,800 seven months after dropping the news format.

All-News Stations on Their Own

The nine stations that decided to stay with "all news, all the time," actually became all news some of the time. A few sign off at 1 a.m. The rest fill the late evening hours and after-midnight time slots with network drama, syndicated talk shows or both. Sunday morning programming emphasizes religious news and public-affairs features. Sunday afternoons and some weeknights are devoted to broadcasting sports events, which all stations regard as news—"play-by-play news." Three reasons are given for carrying sports events and other essentially non-news elements in a news-station's programming:

1) Such scheduling is thought to increase listenership during those broadcast times when radio use would otherwise be minimal. This is particularly true of live coverage of sports. The expectation is that thereby the station becomes better known—and more widely used—and will increase its audience share even for the hours when it is programming news and information exclusively.

2) Sports programming attracts advertisers who normally do not buy time on these stations even for prime-time commercials. Moreover, the sports programs are scheduled during times that usually command the lowest advertising rates. By airing sports the station can charge more for spots or can be assured several hours of spon-

Table 2
Size of News Staffs at All-News Stations*
by Market Size

	1977 Sample			1979 Sample		
Market	N	Median Number	Range	N	Median Number	Range
Large	4	19	12 to 20	11	25	9 to 46
Medium	4	15	6 to 23	9	13	7 to 29
Small	1	(7)	—	3	7	5 to 11

* With at least 84 hours of air time a week.

sored time.

3) Use of syndicated or network talk shows and drama, on the other hand, permits the station to operate with a reduced staff, usually only an engineer or, at best, one other person to provide time, temperature and little else during station breaks. Such savings are crucial for marginal stations.

One manager in a medium-sized market estimated that functioning independently of NIS would double operating expenses should the station attempt the same coverage for the same duration. Reported increases in the number of full-time news-related staff range from two to 15, supplemented by part-time help.

No news director was satisfied with the size of his staff. Most station managers thought the present number provided adequate news coverage of the area, but one news director estimated that at least four more on-air personnel and six additions to the support staff would be ideal for the job he was attempting to do.

The nine stations that stayed all-news vary widely in news staff size (see Table 2). The medium-sized market stations in the 1977 sample are slightly above their counterparts in the 1979 sample, while the large-market stations are well below the average reported by all-news stations in large cities in 1979.

The stations rely heavily, and some almost exclusively, on the phone to cover beats. Only one has more than two reporters on the street daily, and most can release only one staff member to cover a breaking story.

"Aggressive telephone beat coverage" was emphasized in the In-

formation Manual prepared by a news director for his staff:

> If a report comes in on the police or fire monitor, it isn't necessary to wait until a reporter gets there to find out what's happening. For example, when you determine the location of a fire, make a direct phone call to a business or residence in the vicinity. Their first-hand report, while the event is taking place, is much more dramatic than a report given after the event is over.

A few stations routinely cover city council and county commission meetings, especially evening meetings; two even carry such meetings live. But the others either rely on newspaper reports or arrange a call after the meeting from an official. Some fail to cover such meetings "unless we know an important measure is up for a showdown vote."

All stations now try to emphasize area news more than when they had NIS commitments. "It's a blessing in disguise to be without NIS," according to one news director. "We can at last do regional stories, and our clocks now make more sense."

Freed of their obligation to allocate time to NIS's national coverage, the stations saw their chance to expand local and area coverage, which all regard as requisite for increasing audience size. "Even the old technology [newspapers] relies too heavily on wire services." And "The further you get away from local news, the more your audience falls off."

But economic reality determined how thoroughly and extensively the stations could be a "total information service" without NIS backup. All, of course, finally settled in with a mix of wire and audio sources provided by national, regional and specialized news services and networks. Some few, like the station advertising itself as the city's "first electronic newspaper," began to rely more heavily on the Washington news bureau of its parent corporation or informal exchanges among the stations within the group. Others sought closer working ties with sister television stations or with an affiliated local paper. That several such attempts have not been very successful or such relationships entirely reliable attests to the fierce news competition among the media in some cities.

Thus it was the independents which had the most difficult time adjusting, and within a year after NIS's departure, only the one in the sample affiliated with a local newspaper remained as an all-news station.

The Commitment to Local Coverage

The principal differences among the stations which even briefly tried to continue with the news format after May, 1977, lay in their local and regional efforts and in their mix of hard news and soft features.

Differences among the stations in resources, both personnel and equipment, accounted in part for the variations in how many versions and updatings of a local item were broadcast throughout the day and in how frequently actualities and "voicers"[58] were used in its dissemination. One news director's rule that at least every third item must contain an actuality contrasted markedly with another director's complaint that "There is still too much rip, read and repeating on this station." Some stations had already established a reputation for mini-documentaries or investigative reports about local issues; others kept strictly to short, bulletin-type, hard news items.

The stations agreed in their estimate that on the average day there was a 50-50 split between area and non-area news aired. The size of the community, of course, was an important factor in how much local news could be generated, but signal strength as well as financial considerations helped determine the stations' working definition of what is local and what is newsworthy.

All stations relied on print sources to alert them to coming events ("We get agenda for meetings from published accounts in the paper") and possible news developments. "After all, newspapers are the bellwethers regarding what is news around here." And all stations made some use of the press releases they received from local and area organizations. "Anyone who ignores them is a fool and doesn't know his business." Broadcast sources were not systematically monitored. Two station managers, in fact, boasted, "They monitor us."

Officials' estimates of station origination of news items, in the first two months of operating independently of NIS, ranged from 30 percent to 80 percent of all local material used. This diversity was due primarily to the drastic reduction in staff at two stations owing to lagging income. One major-market station at the time of the interview had a skeletal staff of 12, down from a high of 23. Audio cuts produced at another struggling station in a medium-sized city

which also had to reduce its staff by almost half decreased from 30 to 10 a day by mid-summer of 1977.[59]

Much of the slack in active news reporting was taken up by local feature material, usually contributed or supplied by free lancers or even prepared by house talent. But variations among the stations in their use and types of soft items were based less on their ability to provide more substantial fare than on their appraisal of their audience and its listening habits or on their view of the station's function in the community.

Some denied they program for any particular audience. "Perhaps we unconsciously program for the young, because the staff is young. But we're not deliberately aiming our stuff to any particular segment." One station manager even argued against tailoring content or emphasis to a specific audience. "That would spell disaster in this town, because it's too diverse."

Other stations claimed a "natural audience" typically male, over 35, with at least some college and a business or professional interest, living in a suburb, and making $15,000 or more. Two stations attempted an audience study that largely confirmed this view of the all-news audience. But both found a greater percentage of women than expected. These data are suspect, however.[60]

"Anyone who listens to us for more than a hour is a masochist," asserted one manager. Another said, "The longest anyone listens to us is 10 minutes, except senior citizens." Several stations subscribed to the principle "You give us 22 minutes; we'll give you the world," and programmed accordingly. "I believe in consistency. I start over every 30 minutes." The intent was to build high "cumes" with the constantly changing audience.[61] A station manager explained:

> The justification of all-news is that it cumes faster than music stations. That is, a music station may have a higher number of listeners in a given quarter hour but a lower cumulative listenership than all-news. I really believe that all-news is listened to by more people for shorter periods of time.

Some managers and news directors visualized radio audiences periodically shifting between satisfying their informational and entertainment needs, from an all-news station to a favorite music station. This idea of a shared audience contrasts with the view that listeners can be retained by blending "high-interest tidbits and features into the programming" at unannounced times. "We use hookers to keep

people listening. We inject features to keep them from being bored."

Journalism and Show Business

Some stations tended to emphasize information equally with the news, providing frequent weather reports and time checks, announcements of scheduled meetings of civic, church and neighborhood organizations and such useful tips as how to treat frostbite or reduce fuel bills. Some attempted to focus on people whether "in the news" or not. "People want to know what their neighbors are doing, how they feel about things."

"Radio news is show business that maintains credibility," a young news director said of his journalistic philosophy. "It's got to be made interesting and entertaining." The show-business refrain was heard at every station visited, and was invoked approvingly in every case. NBC's morning "Today" show was cited frequently as an exemplar of what the station was trying to do. At others, the model was the music station: "We use stories like program tools—like the Top Ten favorites." None likened the all-news station to local newspapers. Station managers and news directors alike distinguished the role of a radio station with an all-news format from that of the newspaper on one or more of three related dimensions:

1) Unlike newspapers, all-news stations cannot separate economics from reporting.

> Radio competition is strong. Print is not. There are many stations in town competing for the audience and the advertising dollar. But the evening paper here has a virtual monopoly.
>
> If we alienate an advertiser by what we broadcast, he can go elsewhere on the dial. If he needs to use a print medium, he must stay with the paper whether he likes it or not. And it's the same for readers, but not for listeners.

2) All-news radio is more accountable and has to be more responsible than newspapers. The reference invariably was to the Federal Communications Commission:

> FCC thinks they're assuring diversity, but their rules and directives foster sameness, mediocre sameness. They should let the people do the programming and step in only when people, radio people, are irresponsible. . . . Because of FCC regulations, everyone has to do news—and radio ends up doing it in a half-baked way. FCC's recommendations about percentage of time for this and a percentage for

that kind of programming have a dampening effect on creativity and originality in the industry.

An amalgam of these two perceived differences between broadcast and print journalist provided the rationale for several managers to rule against attempting to editorialize on the air. For others, not broadcasting editorials—very few do—was a function of time available and not policy: no time to write them, much less reflect on community problems; a shorthanded staff too preoccupied with the daily routine. Both managers and news directors recognized editorializing as legitimate and necessary but would rather spend their time and money on investigative reporting and mini-documentaries on local problems.

That's a better way of creating controversy, of stirring things up a little, and it gets us more attention. Yeah, we have a selfish motive too, of course. But it's in line with our idea of what this station should be doing.

Another news director said, "We must scoop the others [broadcasters] and uncover things, so we get talked about."

However, one manager was quite vehement in disapproving campaigning, even when "disguised as revealing conditions that need the community's attention." Another said, "Radio has no place in discussing political matters. We should leave that to newspapers." A news director added:

Politics isn't really important to people. If it were, more would vote. And look at the small percentage who are actually registered [to vote]. Even fewer newspapers would fall by the wayside if they concentrated less on politics.

3) The expectations of radio listeners are not the same as those of newspaper readers, explaining in part why some all-news stations are content "to get the surface news." Because radio programming for a generation has been identified with music, "People are conditioned to be entertained by radio." "To us they come for a once-over lightly." "Radio can have only a limited role in news dissemination." But it can be "a real service for busy people who are not satisfied with what they get in five-minute fragments from other stations or find television's news-scheduling inconvenient."

All-news stations have "a unique role among news media, telling what's happening when it's happening, providing up-to-date—up-to-the-minute—live reports." Radio is "an instant medium; our immediacy, convenience and flexibility are our trump cards." And

sometimes those cards are played right: "We can scoop TV, especially at night." And scoop newspapers:

> While we were on the air all-news, we changed the face of the afternoon newspaper. It couldn't treat the news as it did before. Because of us, the stuff was old hat by the time they got out with their editions.

But all-news must always have something new and vital to report. That is, "It must become an originator, not a paper-copier, of news. It must have constant freshness."

How to make it "interesting and entertaining" and at the same time "maintain credibility" is a challenge the industry continues to face. "I don't know yet the fine line between show business and journalism respectability, but I'm working on it."

One of the more challenging problems facing all-news stations is, by their own admission, how to avoid boring listeners "so they don't tune out." Some managers, however, were satisfied with sharing their audience with other stations. "The cumes we get that way are more than adequate." And some "actually invite their listeners to change channels with their 22-minute request." Some were simply resigned to having a constantly changing audience. Others believed that repetition of news items, boring or not, was essential in large markets where audience turnover is expected to be heavy.

> There are numerous work shifts in this town, not just the traditional three. It's a blue-collar town and then some. Every hour, a good percentage of people, night and day, are either going to work or returning home. When they tune us in we can't afford to let them miss a headline story.

In other markets where audience maintenance was considered essential, the problem of "news sameness" was very real. Preparing a new lead and emphasizing a different angle, or using a different technique (actualities, voicers, "live-line wraps"[62]) for each successive report or updating a news item periodically or shifting the order of headline stories are the usual options, but for many stations they were unrealistic solutions. For stations with limited staff, only the essential equipment and a tight budget, the problem is how to put it all together day after day. "The problem is to make it all work, to be able to program everything, to handle it all—the sheer mechanics of it. Incredible!"

A Future for News Stations

Is the all-news format a viable one for radio? No interviewed official could deny at least the popular success of the format in several of the country's larger markets (in cities not represented in this survey). The disputed question is rather about the economic feasibility of news stations in medium-sized and small markets.

Station officials were divided on this question. Some of those whose stations were forced to abandon all-news programming thought the format could be sustained in their market, given the right conditions. Others regarded size of market as one of those conditions. However:

> The idea that only big cities, only the major markets, can support an all-news station is a negative viewpoint propagated by the industry and its publications. Whether all-news can make it has nothing to do with size of market. The critical question is, How great an audience percentage can you command?

> Culturally every region of this country is the same when it comes to wanting and needing information. Every area has about the same proportion of its people who are curious about what is going on in their own town and in the world. . . .

Aside from market size, what other factors seem critical to success or failure in all-news programming?

"For all-news to make it, you need two years, good backing and a disaster in the community that can be exploited." "Magnificent zeal, sufficient capital, market on the upscale, much money and willingness to wait a long time to recoup the investment." This recital hardly exhausts the conditions for success, but the two statements are representative.

A heavy capital commitment and a long wait seem essential for the news format to survive in any market. Officials at every station investigated spoke of "the extensive," "enormous," "staggering" operational and man-power costs of a news operation. "By its nature, all-news costs more than other formats."

Some thought that only a station owned by a corporation willing to risk a large investment could make a go of it. Others stipulated a "group operation, which can draw on common resources"—either sharing news-gathering expenses with a local paper or, at minimum, one-station support. But this kind of support was of help only in delaying eventual failure among such stations in this study.

"Had we stayed with the format, it would have been uphill—but

slowly." Not only "much money," but much patience is needed. "I believe all-news could have grown into a successful format here had we kept going. But we didn't have enough time to bring about needed changes." Given a community's stereotyped association of radio with music, "An all-news audience is always slow building," but "When you get them, audiences are fiercely loyal."

Agency support must also be persuasively solicited, because "All-news cannot make it with only small retailers." "National advertising is a must." Advertising agencies, however, must have evidence of an audience.

Several officials set a minimum signal strength for a news station. The consensus was "at least 5,000 wattage." Signal penetration is thought to be important because of the widespread notion that the news audience is suburban. But others—a minority—regard the "specialized audience" idea as "*the* myth about all-news."

A Critique and Confirmation

This study found little consensus among 33 radio officials who have a working knowledge of the news format. They disagreed about the staff, size, content mix, the propriety of editorializing, audience composition—even the viability of the all-news format. But the majority opinion was that "With the right market conditions and audience acceptance, it can work" in most towns, particularly if the programming includes strong local coverage.

A follow-up study in 1979 of all-news stations[63] checked the tenability of this claim and sought clarification about the predictive value of the four operating characteristics mentioned by more than half of the 33 interviewed radio personnel as requisites for success with the all-news format. In addition to market size, the 23 stations in the 1979 survey were identified by their assigned channel, power and media affiliation, both in and beyond the local market.

As summarized in Table 3, almost half are found in markets of more than a million residents; nine are in medium-sized markets such as Sacramento (801,000) and Wilkes-Barre (342,000). Three are in communities under 300,000, including tiny Edinburg, Tex.

As of May, 1979, the 23 stations had been operating as all-news for at least 17 months, five for more than a decade. Apparently, the format is viable, even without a comprehensive service like NIS,

Table 3
Comparison of Operating Characteristics of All-News Stations in Different-Sized Markets

Market	Median Number of Months as All-News[a]	Low Frequency Channel[b]	At Least 5kw Power	Corporation Ties	Local Media Affiliation	Median Number of Advantages
Large (N = 11)	52	45%	82%	64%	55%	3
Medium (N = 9)	40	11	56	44	56	1
Small (N = 3)	35	33	0	0	67	1

[a] As of May 1979
[b] Under 1000 kilohertz.

and even in communities of under 300,000 population.

But the operating conditions, supposedly necessary for success, do not seem to identify either the small- or medium-market stations. In the 1979 sample, the three stations broadcasting in small markets had been using the format for 22 to 47 months but meet on the average only one or two of the four conditions. The medium-market stations, averaging 40 months with the format, meet all four criteria in no case, and three of the four criteria in only three cases.

The four supposed advantages are most closely associated with the large-market all-news stations. Only five of these stations meet fewer than three of the operating conditions. The deeper penetration afforded by low-frequency and high-power transmission[44] is clearly an advantage in large metropolitan areas, particularly for reaching outlying suburbs, which usually have a high concentration of potential listeners. The relevance, for big-city news operations, of corporate affiliation and sister stations or newspaper ties locally can be appreciated by recalling the differences in staff sizes between large- and medium-market stations in the 1979 sample (Table 2). The larger market stations have a wider area to cover, both in disseminating and gathering the news, and the telephone is not always the best or even an appropriate means of covering a story. But as the great variation in the size of the staffs among both the large- and medium-market stations suggests, the extent of local news

coverage is dependent in large part on available financial resources. At least at the outset—the first two years, in the opinion of most of the radio officials interviewed—an all-news station cannot be expected to be profitable or even self-supporting. Until advertising generates sufficient revenue, the all-news enterprise can better survive the lean months if it can be sustained by a parent organization or by local affiliates.

But at least three large-market all-news stations in 1979 have neither corporate ties nor local affiliation, and that situation also characterizes four of the nine medium-market stations and one small-market station. These eight independently owned stations tend to rely heavily on syndicated material and newswire copy, while supplying only minimal and usually bulletin-type local coverage. And they have been broadcasting that way for from 17 months to more than 10 years.

Thus some doubt is cast not only on the importance of the four singled-out factors but also on the necessity of maintaining an extensive or in-depth local news coverage. What seems critical is the formation and development of listeners' expectations regarding the all-news format. Unlike readers of newspapers, radio audiences have few preconceived notions of what a news station provides. The station itself can and must fashion a community's expectations about all-news radio. This demands a well-planned and executed promotional campaign not merely to create widespread awareness of the new format but also to instruct unobtrusively the way the station can most profitably be used by the listener. As long as its clocks and program offerings are consonant with the general life style and work habits of the area, a news station with even a modest staff can produce a sound, a style and a service that a sufficient number of listeners can learn to accept and rely on. This is what accounts for the survival, as all-news, of five stations in this study's original sample of 15. The rest were inadequately prepared, professionally or financially, to meet the format's operational demands. They were either unwilling or unable to make a long-term commitment to the format, especially when they had to rely on their own resources after NIS no longer was available.

That all-news radio can flourish, not merely survive, in various-sized markets and in all regions of the country is the cautious conclusion of this study, even in the face of the widespread defection

from the format that attended NIS' departure. The 23 stations in the 1979 survey and the 29 stations in the 1979 *Broadcasting Yearbook* listed as all-news[45] attest to the format's versatility and contradict the judgment that all-news is viable only in major markets.

That is good news for AM radio, which increasingly is being challenged by FM as a music chanel. One of the more thoughtful and knowledgeable managers interviewed for this study has analyzed the prospects for AM radio and offered three formats for AM survival: modern country western, which "appeals to the less educated, less affluent and less sophisticated, who are the last to embrace FM because of cost," a talk format featuring charismatic personalities, combined with lots of sports and some news, and predominatly news and information.

Radio, since its invention, has always carried news. But in the not too distant future it may come to pass that news will carry AM radio.

NOTES

1. "Dry Run Precedes KFWB's Switch to All News," *Broadcasting*, Mar. 11, 1968, p. 66.

2. Jean R. Paulson, "Listeners Applaud All-News Radio," *Quill*, Sept. 1960, pp. 12-14. See also, "All-News Radio Station Starts," New York *Times*, May 17, 1960, p. 75.

3. Paulson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

4. "All-News Radio," by graduate students in Broadcast Journalism at The American University, Washington, D.C., 1977, pp. 74-7 (mimeo).

5. David Shaw, *Journalism Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 197.

6. Advertisement in *Broadcasting*, May 22, 1961, pp. 44-45.

7. Ben Bagdikian, "Fires, Sex and Freaks," *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 10, 1976, p. 40.

8. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

9. Bagdikian, *op. cit*, p. 54, and "Balto's WAYE Went All-News Just in Time for Those 10 Days in April," *Variety*, April 24, 1968, p. 33

10. But see Mike Wolverton, *And Now . . . the News* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 48-9, for an alternative perspective of WNUS' operations.

11. "Drive time: radio time period—A.M. (6:00 to 10:00) and P.M. (4:00 to 7:00)—when most commuting listeners are in automobiles," Lincoln Diamant, *The Broadcast Communications Dictionary* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1975), p. 37. These are regarded as "prime time" for radio broadcasting.

12. In early 1968, WAVA became a 24-hour all-news station and converted its sister FM station to the same format. "Can Anyone Patent All-News?" *Broadcasting*, Mar. 3, 1969, pp. 40-41.

13. American University study *op. cit.*, p. 76.

14. "Dry Run Precedes KFWB's Switch to All News, *Broadcasting*, Mar. 11, 1968, p. 66.

15. "Westinghouse Switches to All News," *Broadcasting*, Jan. 15, 1968, pp. 44, 46.

16. Steve Knoll, "All-News on Verge of Boom," *Variety*, April 3, 1968, p. 37.

17. "Can Anyone Patent All-News?" *Broadcasting*, Mar. 3, 1969, pp. 40-41.

18. "The All-News Way of Radio Journalism," *Broadcasting*, Jan. 6, 1975, pp. 36, 42.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

20. Quoted in Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

21. "The All-News Way of Radio Journalism," *Broadcasting*, Jan. 6, 1975, p. 36.

22. Bagdikian, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

24. "Radio Copes With the Needs of a News-Hungry Public," *Broadcasting*, Sept. 27, 1976, p. 74. Describing his tenure as an editor at WNUS Chicago during that station's all-news years, Wolverton evoked a similar image: "Our consumption of hard news was copious. To feed this monster we had almost every service of almost every wire service in existence," *op. cit.*, p. 48.

25. Knoll, "Choice of Two in All-News," *Variety*, Dec. 4, 1968, p. 35.

26. Quoted in Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

27. Quoted in Knoll, "Choice of Two in All-News," *Variety*, Dec. 4, 1968, p. 35.

28. "The All-News Way of Radio Journalism," *Broadcasting*, Jan. 6, 1975, pp. 36, 42.

29. Les Brown, "Part of Capital Staff Dismissed by Westinghouse Broadcasting," New York *Times*, Nov. 21, 1975, p. 86, and "Westinghouse Broadcasting Set to Reduce News Staff Abroad," New York *Times*, April 7, 1976, p. 82.

30. "Introduction to NBC/NIS," *Start Your NIS Station Right*, NBC News & Information Service, pp. 4-5.

31. "No. 2 Network for NBC Radio to Be All News," *Broadcasting*," Feb. 10, 1975, pp. 78-80, and "NBC Throws in the Towel on All-News NIS," *ibid.*, Nov. 8, 1976, pp. 34-36.

32. "No. 2 Network," *loc. cit.* Technically NIS was not a network but a service of the existing NBC network. When NIS began operations, it was coordinated with the programming of NBC's regular radio network of news and entertainment features to 237 affiliates. Coordination was essential, because by a 1941 FCC ruling NBC could not own more than one network. Prior to 1941, NBC had a Red and a Blue network, but FCC required the company to sell its Blue network, which became the American Broadcasting Co., Operation of NIS created no problem, because NBC simply reversed the timing of its transmissions. Whereas NBC Radio provided national news for only a few minutes each hour, leaving the remaining

portion for local stations, NIS assigned those minutes for local broadcasting and transmitted its own service when the regular NBC network was not transmitting. "NBC Radio Tries to Line Up New Affils for All-News," *Variety*, Feb. 12, 1975, p. 51, and Brown, "NBC Radio Will Sell a News Service," New York *Times*, Feb. 10, 1975, p. 53.

33. It is difficult to determine exactly how many stations joined NIS at its inception, or even how many were subscribing during NIS' peak period or in May, 1977, when it ceased operations. Reports vary. Two days before the service was to begin, *Broadcasting* quoted NIS officials as saying 33 stations would be in the initial group of subscribers ("NBC Puts NIS in Starting Gate," June 16, 1975, p. 44). A later estimate put the starting number at 27 ("NBC's All-News Radio Still Plugging Away and Hopeful," *Variety*, Feb. 11, 1976, p. 56). Bagdikian (*op. cit.*, p. 40) reported that only 25 stations began the service. *Time* put the number as high as 80 ("The Day the Music Died," June 30, 1975, pp. 48-9). In a June 16, 1976, article (later reprinted as an advertisement by NIS) the Louisville *Courier-Journal* reported that NIS had begun with a 27-station lineup (James Doussard, "All-News Radio Network Catching On"). The 1976 *Broadcasting Yearbook*, reporting station-furnished data obtained in late 1975, listed 73 stations claiming the all-news format; of these, 26 identified themselves as subscribers to NIS (pp. D-78-80).

Similar difficulties arise when attempting to determine the maximum number of NIS stations using the service at any period. NBC claimed 60 subscribers in October, 1975 ("Confidence Reigns at NBC Over NIS," *Broadcasting*, Oct. 20, 1975, p. 49). *Variety* reported 58 early in 1976 ("NBC's All-News Radio Service Still Plugging Away and Hopeful," Feb. 11, 1976, p. 56). The *Courier-Journal* article cited above counted 62 subscribers, with 10 more committed to signing. An NIS advertisement placed in several magazines (e.g., *Newsweek*, Oct. 4, 1976, pp. 44-5; *Good Housekeeping*, Nov. 1976, pp. 318-19; *McCall's*, Nov. 1976, pp. 266-7; and *Time*, Nov. 15, 1976, pp. 30-31) also identified 64 stations. It seems that at its peak, NIS had no more than 64 stations, despite network optimism. Apparently two early subscribers decided to drop NIS before the service folded; most reports indicate that only 62 stations were with the service when it announced it would cease ("NIS Orphans Plan Their Next Move," *Broadcasting*, Nov. 22, 1976, p. 25; "Stations Work to Fill Void NIS Will Leave," *ibid.*, Jan. 24, 1977, p. 23). In a February 22, 1977, mailgram to a manager of one of the all-news stations in the sample, NIS executive Jerry Coffin listed only 50 subscribing stations. Presumably at least 12 all-news stations dropped NIS between its announcement of cancellation and the final day of service.

34. "NBC's All-News Radio Service Still Plugging Away and Hopeful," *Variety*, Feb. 11, 1976, p. 56.

35. *Loc. cit.*

36. Shaw, *supra*, n. 8, p. 198.

37. NIS supplied guidance, technical advice—and much encouragement and enthusiasm—also in printed material sent periodically to subscribing stations.

38. "Radio Copes With the Needs of a News-Hungry Public," *Broadcasting*, Sept. 27, 1976, pp. 74-5.

39. "NIS Orphans Plan Their Next Moves," *Broadcasting*, Nov. 22, 1976, p. 25.

40. In addition to *Broadcasting* and *Variety*, see the issues of *Television/Radio Age* for 1975-77. Also E. Rosenthal, "Some Key Lessons Learned in Radio News Shakeout,'" *Television/Radio Age*, Dec. 12, 1977, pp. 35-7, 66-72.

41. Two case studies emphasize the operational characteristics of seven all-news stations: L. B. Louis, "All News Radio," *Broadcast Programming and Production*, 3 (July/August 1977), pp. 8-13 (KTAR Phoenix, KRXV Fort Worth, WERE Cleveland, WNCR Worcester); The American University study, *op. cit.* (WAVA, WRC, WTOP, all in Washington, D.C.).

42. This study was funded in part by a research grant from the National Association of Broadcasters.

43. Tables 31 and 32, *Characteristics of the Population: United States Summary Part 1, Section 1* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973).

44. This 27%-40%-33% representation of market size in the sample compares with the 25%-38%-37% division of the markets exposed to NIS-subscribing stations in November 1976, when the sample was chosen.

45. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the 33 radio officials for their generous cooperation: KJOE (AM), Shreveport, John Mitchell; KQV (AM), Pittsburgh, Robert Dickey, Carl Echels; KUFF (AM), Albuquerque, C. W. (Bill) Weaver; KXXA (FM), Little Rock, Richard Brady, George Jennings, David Phillips; WBIR (AM), Knoxville, Neal Branch; WCAR (AM), Detroit, Hugh Barr, Beth Konrad, Wayne Lawrie; WCSH (AM), Portland, Maine, Herb Crosby, H. P. (Pete) Smith; WEAN (AM), Providence, John Ennis, Lincoln W. N. Pratt, John Ryan, David Seaton; WIBU (AM), Poynette (Madison), Wisconsin, Thomas R. Holter; WLBZ (AM), Bangor, Maine, Harry Gordon, Edward J. Owen; WPOP (AM), Hartford, Radford Berky, Dick Springfield; WRBC (AM), Jackson, Missisippi, Stan Case, Ed Linville; WRIT (AM), Milwaukee, Jack Gallo, Bernie Strachota, Wayne Weinberg; WSOC (AM), Charlotte, Don Bell, Lee Morris, Brian Thompson; WWTC (AM), Minneapolis, Doyle Rose, Ken Trimble, Lee E. Zanin. Several are no longer with the listed station. Two have left broadcasting.

46. A consultant firm in Marion, Iowa, that specializes in advising media properties, both print and broadcast, on how to tailor their formats to attract large audiences. Such essentially commercial advice has been criticized in some quarters as detrimental to professional journalism. See, for example, Ron Powers, *The Newscasters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977).

47. "The very center of a radio station," according to Donald B. Upham, "Operating and Studio Facilities," in Robert Hilliard, ed., *Radio Broadcasting* (New York: Hastings House, 1967), pp. 45-47. It is a console "where sounds coming from various microphones, . . . tape recorders, . . . telephone lines are joined together in various combinations," p. 55.

48. Ed Routt, James M. McGrath and Fredric A. Weiss, *The Radio Format Conundrum* (New York: Hastings House, 1978), p. 190, outlines a plan "for an efficient, reliable and believable [all-]news operation" that "calls for 20 full-time employees and 12 part-timers." They recognize that "this plan calls for fewer personnel than many major market operations such as KNX, Los Angeles; WINS,

New York; and WEEM, Chicago" employ. The plan, moreover, does not envision a service such as NIS, but does include in its suggested staff size not merely the news personnel, but also the engineering staff. NIS itself provided no guidelines regarding the size of the local news staff, except a list of "factors to be weighed."

49. A clock is "sometimes called a 'wheel.' [It] indicates, in the fashion of a clock, the sequence of program events within a given hour," Routt, *et al.*, p. 296.

50. Monitoring units. They are receivers in radio newsrooms used "to monitor various police departments (city, county and highway patrol) and fire department transmissions." Jay Hoffer, *Radio Production Techniques* (Blue Ridge Summit, Penn.: TAB Books, 1974), p. 170.

51. See footnote 37.

52. Two national audience-survey organizations. The Arbitron Co. uses diaries delivered to listeners' homes. It schedules four surveys a year, one in each season. Its published results are referred to as the winter book, the spring book, etc. The Pulse Inc., which ceased operations May 1, 1978 ("The More Things Change: A Radio Year in Review," *Broadcasting*, July 24, 1978, p. 73), gathered its data in personal interviews with aided-recall rosters of the area stations' programs.

53. An actuality is a "news report from the scene, or [the] voice of [a] newsmaker from any location," Routt, *et al.*, p. 295.

54. Preparing a cart, or cartridge; that is, a "container holding single tape or endless loop," on which a news item or interview segment is recorded—an audio cut, Lincoln Diamant, ed., *The Broadcast Communications Dictionary* (New York: Hastings House, 1974). "Carts permit automatic cueing: when a tape is inserted into the machine, [it] automatically runs until it finds the start of the announcement, stops and waits until a button is pushed, starts instantly, plays to the end and then stops," Donald B. Upham, "Operating and Studio Facilities," in Robert Hilliard, ed., *Radio Broadcasting* (New York: Hastings House, 1967), p. 47. See discussion of cartridge tape equipment in Joseph S. Johnson and Kenneth K. Jones, *Modern Radio Station Practices* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 133-4.

55. "Broadcast stations owned and operated (O&O) by a network . . . usually located in the most profitable U.S. markets," Diamant, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

56. An exaggeration. According to NIS' published list in November 1976 (see footnote 33), 57% of the subscribing stations were in cities with populations of less than 300,000.

57. "Stations Work to Fill Void NIS Will Leave," *Broadcasting*, Jan. 24, 1977, p. 23, and "All-News Radio Band Together for Self-Help and Programming," *op. cit.*, Feb. 21, 1977, p. 25.

58. A voicer is a "newsroom term. [It] indicates [a] story recorded [voiced] by someone other than the anchor person," Routt, *et al.*, p. 301. It is a taped report from a news person who is either on location where, or near where, the story is taking place or has returned to the station with a prepared script.

59. Both of these stations are no longer all-news.

60. The "surveys" conducted by the two radio stations used the same research design. Listeners were invited to participate in an audience survey. The volunteers, who supplied their names and addresses, received through the mail a prepared

questionnaire. The response rate was 62 percent for one station and 71 percent for the other, providing data on more than 500 and 700 listeners, respectively. Such surveys have no statistical validity, however.

61. Cume, or cumulative audience, is a "survey term used to designate unduplicated audience" within a given part of the broadcast day, Routt, *et al.*, p. 297.

62. A wrap is a "voicer" with an actuality in it. A newscaster introduces and closes an audio cut.

63. Using the listing of such stations in the 1978 *Broadcasting Yearbook*, p. D-83, the Communications Research Center at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, conducted a mail survey of all-news stations in spring 1979. The questionnaire, which asked the station to identify itself by format used, was sent to only 62 of the 108 listed all-news stations, because cross-checking with other information available to the researchers indicated that at least 46 stations were incorrectly listed as all-news. Returns from 32, or 53%, of the contacted stations showed that six denied they were all-news stations and three others devoted less than 50% of their weekly broadcast time to news and information—the operational definition employed to specify all-news stations. Among the 23 all-news stations in the 1979 sample were one large-market and two medium-market stations from the 1977 sample—three of the five stations in that study still using the all-news format in 1979. The 1979 *Yearbook*, available only after the 1979 study was under way, lists 117 all-news stations (p. D-87), but at least 53 of these are improperly identified as such. Only 29 stations in the 1979 *Yearbook* use the term "all news" to describe their program format.

64. Sydney Head, *Broadcasting in America*, 3rd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 39.

65. These self-proclaimed all-news stations are scattered throughout the country and are evenly distributed among large, medium and small communities, as follows:

	Small	Medium	Large	Totals
East	1	4	5	10
Midwest	1	1	3	5
South	3	2	3	8
West	4	2	0	6
Totals	9	9	11	29